

FUNNIER

'I like the story, really I do—'

Ed wasn't looking good. He was greyer, if that's possible and he'd put on weight, and it wasn't the pudgy of some jolly fellow but the fat that one day soon is going to choke your aorta and leave you face down in your spaghetti marinara. And he was still wearing that thin little tie, the red one with the grease stain from a party two Christmases ago.

Ed's office never changed: the windows were always grimy, the desk lamp was always flickering and manuscripts were high in his in-tray, on top of the filing cabinet and on just about any other flat surface.

'— and I like you,' he said.

'And you're always looking for quality content,' I said.

'I've got a magazine to fill. Forty thousand words every damn month.'

'So?'

After years in this business one of the few things I've learned is, as the bard says, 'when something ain't right, it's wrong.'

'Nicely written and all but—' Ed continued.

'Spare me.' I snatched the pages from his desk and looked at my sad little story. Words, words, words. So worked on, so polished, so spare, every sentence essential to the narrative. Occasional poetic references for the literary readers and something funky and contemporary to give it resonance for those stuck in the interminable on-rushing present. It was all there.

He was right of course.

I sat in the bar across the road. It was early and the place was empty except for an old man at the far end staring into his lemonade. Nice and quiet so I could work.

'What'll I get you?' the waitress asked.

'Know any jokes?' I said looking glumly at the manuscript.

'Ever meet my ex?' She looked at me for a moment. 'Helloo, it's a joke.'

'Just tea please, black.'

Here I was in a bar, the stage for thousands, maybe millions of jokes:

an elephant; an alligator; two guys; one guy with a frog on his head; a horse; a sheepdog; a Rabbi, a Priest and a psychiatrist; Donald Trump, Meryl Streep and Vladimir Putin, and so on.

Not today. No one came in.

Come on think, you're a funny guy.

Didi says I'm funny. Says it all the time: 'Look at Daddy, isn't he funny?' and Bo claps his chubby little hands with delight at Daddy who's just slipped on the hall runner and is sprawled out on the floor, groceries all over the place, papers strewn but the day's mail still in his mouth.

Then Duke, our Labrador, starts in on the act, licking Daddy's nose while he lies there groaning. And everyone falls about the place...

I was funny as a kid.

Here's my Mum showing yet another girlfriend that same black and white photo of me when I was two. 'Give him the slightest chance and he'd drop his nappies and be off.'

'How adorable,' the girlfriend would coo.

'And his little chubby botty,' she'd continue.

'Does he still...?' Mum would ask.

'Oh yes,' the girlfriend replies. 'Any chance he gets.'

I was funny in school. I've got the report cards to prove it.

'...would do better if he would focus on his studies and stop trying to be the class clown'.

Not so funny at Uni though.

'So your thesis is that humour is about releasing some kind of collective tension?'

'That's right, Professor Henderson.' Professor Jane Henderson who's eyes are as green as the Pacific and who's sitting close to me, leaning over as I lean too.

'The joke is a taboo,' I continued. 'Once told everyone is relieved because the comedian has redefined that particular social boundary. The audience's laughter is a product of pent-up psychic energy being released.'

'Of course, some jokes don't work,' she said looking at me with those beautiful stern green eyes. 'Such as when a comedian oversteps the bounds.' She moved away from me, straightening her skirt. 'That's when the audience can turn on the joke-teller...and he can become...ostracised.'

Funny? Once I got a job at an office, there was no stopping me. Government stumbles, personal failings, management-speak — refocussing core business, strategic opportunities, promoting a producer mindset and mindfulness (being able to concentrate on one teeny-weeny thing while retaining a Buddhist sadhu's awareness of every other thing in the entire office universe) — it was all good grain for my comic grinder.

Yes, I was funny at the office but not funny like Jerry. Jerry, who had the office next to mine, was an inspiration. His braying laugh could be heard right across the floor and he loved the speakerphone so we could all listen in to his conversations. He was a prankster, defacing corporate messages, filling offices with balloons right up to the ceiling and sticky-taping keyholes. He was irreverent in team meetings and snortingly contemptuous of management politesse; Jerry was a plain talker who'd call a spade a big fucking shit-shifter. His team loved him and would have followed him anywhere.

But Jerry ended up accused of abusing one of his team. And then he was up for DUI, lost his licence, had to sell the sports car and was reduced to public transport. Towards the end they took his team away from him and

gave him 'special projects' to do. He was still funny though. They never broke him.

This wasn't getting anywhere. My story was still a lump, a sorry sad obdurate bump.

'Writer eh?' After two hours, the old man at the end of the bar finally said something. 'I can hear your scratching from way over here.'

He coughed and I saw that this was a really old man, wrinkles over wrinkles, rheumy eyes, a few grey strands of hair and a bird-thin frame folded into an ancient trench coat.

'My editor wants humour,' I explained. 'Funny rates way better than anything meaningful these days.'

'I used to write,' he said. 'A long time ago I had a job on the news desk for *The Hong Kong Daily* and in the evening I would write science-fiction for one of those cheap supermarket magazines.'

'But everything changed when I met her. She and her husband had taken the apartment across the floor from mine. He was away a lot on business and I'd pass her occasionally at the noodle seller's or on the stairs. We never spoke but I couldn't get her out of my mind. She had these fantastic fitted dresses and she wore a different one every time I saw her. Perhaps I was lonely: my wife was back in Taiwan looking after her sick mother. Whatever it was, I was in her spell. I couldn't write. I couldn't think of anything. I'd lie on the bed in the evening and smoke and imagine us together in various science-fiction settings.

'So one evening I'm coming back late from the office and she passes me and politely comments on my tie. How nice it is, what a distinctive pattern and how her husband has one just like it. I tell her my wife bought it for me back in Taipei. 'Taipei,' she says. 'My husband travels to Taiwan all the time for work. His company is based right in the centre of Taipei.'

Well we soon put two-and-two together and turns out her husband was having an affair with my wife. What are the chances eh? In all those millions.

'So how did it...?' I asked.

'After that, we started chatting, sharing a meal, keeping each other company. Now that we had something in common. And then I told her about

my writing and it turned out she was a fan of the genre and she offered to help. So I gave her a piece I'd been working on. Now, I never worried about my stories. I figured some people will like them and others, well who cares? My editor prints them and I get paid. But this was different; with her I was nervous and pacing.

So there we are in her little apartment - me walking up and down, smoking and she's on the bed reading.

'Well?' I asked her when she had finished.

'I really like the story—' she said.

'—But?'

'Beautifully written—'

'—Yes, yes?'

'Oh Tony, don't let's argue, it's just a stupid story.' She threw her arms about my neck.

'Tell me,' I insisted.

'Well, it needs to be—'

It was too much. I snatched the story from her and stormed out and we never saw each other again. Her husband was due back the following day and my posting was finished so I was off to the airport and there was my wife waiting for me. It was all fine, except I couldn't get her out of my mind. I still can't. Isn't that ridiculous? And you know I haven't written anything for nearly forty years.

The day has gone now. The bar was filling with office samurai and loud conversations and the waitress was laying out the bowls of salted peanuts.

'So funny man, did you find your joke?' she smiled.

'Like Mr Lutz my old German teacher used to say: funny is as funny does,' I replied.

She looked at me blankly.

'It's better in the original German.'

'Yeah, that's it... ' Ed flipped a page, reading, smacking his chops and chuckling.

I couldn't stand it. Ed's office was stifling and I needed some air. Truth was, I wasn't feeling that great about it. Sure, the piece was funnier and it'd

fill a few pages in his crummy monthly. And yeah, it'll be a top read on the search engines for a few nanoseconds.

Downstairs I stood on the step watching the traffic and the commuters. The first squall of autumn was blowing up from the harbour, pushing leaves and plastic bags before it. I pulled my collar up against the rain and stepped out.

You know writing's a funny business, funnier some days than others.
